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10. Get Smart! An Evaluation of an Initiative in Personal and Professional Development among First Year Undergraduates

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Abstract

The third level learning environment today is characterised by many demand and supply-led challenges. Problems of student engagement, motivation and ability to perform in a third level education environment are well documented, as are the opportunities and challenges posed by new modes of delivery. Knight and Yorke highlight the importance of developing a strong set of personal ‘skills, understandings and personal attributes’ that make graduates ‘more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the community and the economy’ (2003: 7).

In response to this complex relationship between the expectations of industry, student and academic stakeholder groups, the Get Smart! initiative is designed to offer an approach to developing personal and professional skills in first year undergraduate students throughout the DIT. It implements a range of innovative learning and teaching interventions, designed to give students greater ownership of their employability skills, and the confidence to cope with economic upheavals in order to identify and capitalise on career opportunities over a lifetime. Get Smart! tackles the complex relationships between transferable skills, employability and personal competencies, drawing on management competency frameworks and generic skills models. Key elements are the development of information literacy skills, a focus on professionalism, and closing the loop between student perception of the fit between self, programme and career. Engagement, motivation and socialisation are also key tenets.

Get Smart! adopts an innovative curriculum approach whereby the development of personal and employability skills are integrated into *all* modules of the first year curriculum. The initiative also experiments with a variety of traditional and contemporary modes (including Webcourses and Facebook) to assess the most effective means of engaging and communicating with first year students.

Keywords: engagement, first year curriculum, information literacy, personal development, transferable skills, retention

Outline of Fellowship Project

Introduction

The Get Smart! initiative is an innovative programme developed through a bottom-up approach within the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, DIT. It embeds learning strategies, study skills, professional and personal development into *all* first year (particularly first semester) module content, thereby enhancing the learning experience for all students and contributing to the acquisition of a wide range of study, personal, professional, team and academic skills.

This new perspective on teaching and assessment methods aims to facilitate students in adapting confidently to third level education, contributing to the fulfilment of their personal and professional development through a supportive, stimulating and creative learning environment. Concepts of self-management, group management, information management and social awareness are highlighted, thereby further developing the student personally and professionally.

Overall rationale of Get Smart! project 2009/10: To develop a model that may be utilised more widely within the Institute, including the integration of online components to encourage active learning.

Objectives of Get Smart!

1. To improve levels of personal and professional development among first year students
2. To improve levels of information literacy so that students can perform at a high level in all modules, linking to Level 8 dissertation work
3. Through active learning, to increase students' engagement with their programme, and levels of motivation, mindful of the challenges of student retention
4. To support innovative assessment practices, employing online models and resources where possible
5. To foster a more creative and fun work environment
6. To realise enhanced employability and transferable skills

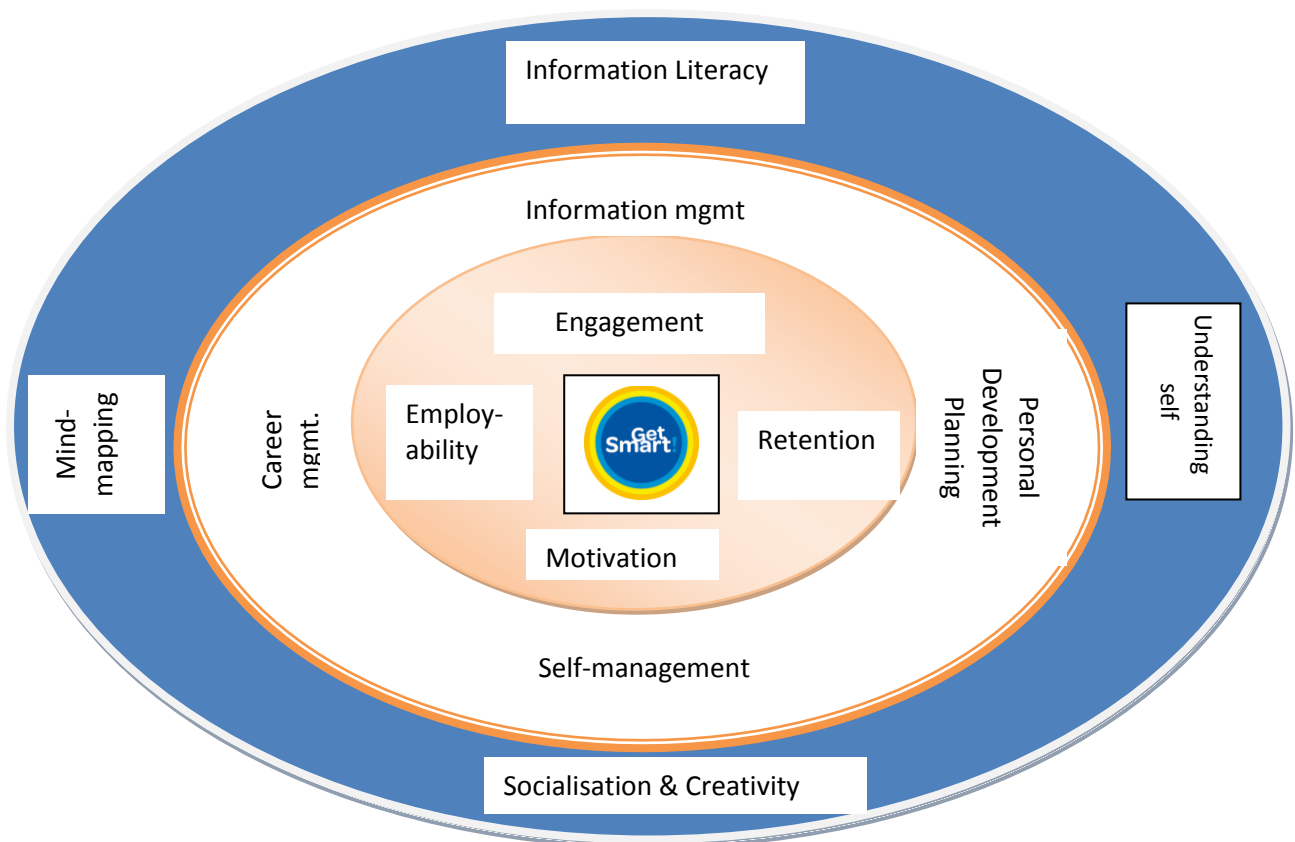


Figure 10.1: A model of the component parts of the Get Smart! initiative

Specifically, Get Smart! is delivered:

- (a) through a revised induction format, where students engage in a 90 minute Get Smart! session of group activities, writing, information searching and reflection
- (b) by integration into the tutorials of *all* modules which are scheduled during the relevant semester. (Each of the 6 modules per semester commits one to two hours to the Get Smart! initiative.)
- (c) by drawing on a three-session Information Literacy module which has been developed
- (d) through a four-hour Get Smart! workshop

- (e) by extensive utilisation of a Communications assessment template. This will mean that in all modules where similar assessment modes are used, common marking criteria will apply. Four such templates have been developed: short essay assessment guidelines, business report template, extended essay assessment guidelines and business presentation assessment template.
- (f) through Mind-mapping
- (g) by giving greater attention to written English, from the commencement of the student's participation in their programme at induction, and supported in time by online writing skills resources
- (h) by giving personal and professional development (PDP) a central role
- (i) by increased resources and time allocated to online resources to facilitate independent learning.

Components of Get Smart!

i. Information literacy sessions

In the academic year 2009/10, all first year students were encouraged to attend three information literacy sessions developed by the library in DIT Cathal Brugha Street in conjunction with Get Smart! These sessions were piloted in the academic year 2008/9 and revised in 2009/10 following discussions on how to create a more focused and systematic learning opportunity. Each of these sessions was linked to two academic modules and assessed through one.

The aim of these sessions was to enable students to confidently identify and use information from legitimate and academically recognised sources. This is particularly important as all final-year undergraduates in the school will be required to undertake a level 8 dissertation from September 2010. In some sessions, students also used practical worksheets which, again, were assessed through the aligned module.

183 students attended session 1

(Introduction to the research process, library orientation, getting going in the library, finding books and the internet and evaluation of information)

165 students attended session 2

(What's a journal and why are they important? Finding journal articles, developing search strategies and using them in a library database, and specialised hospitality, tourism, event and leisure databases)

140 students attended session 3

(Plagiarism, referencing and citing)

Pre-development research (carried out by the author as part of a School review 2007/8) showed that formal integration of these sessions into core modules would strengthen their effectiveness as well as helping to close the loop between these elements. Thus the three sessions were allocated a component mark from the available assessment marks for first year/first semester modules.

An online evaluation of the efficacy of these sessions was carried out in December 2009. Some 87.5% of respondents found these sessions 'very useful' or 'quite useful' in terms of feeling confident in searching for information; 70% rated the sessions 'very useful' or 'quite useful' in terms of settling into their programme, and 85% of students declared the IL sessions 'very useful' or 'quite useful' in terms of assessment preparation.

ii. Workshop

A central component of the Get Smart! initiative was the Get Smart! workshop. This four-hour workshop took place in February 2010 with the following objectives:

- to encourage self-reflection among students;
- to expose students to a range of themes around the area of personal development, professionalism, team dynamics, and employability;
- to foster socialisation among first year students, and between first year and final-year students.

The workshop followed the format of a keynote speaker (RTE's Kathryn Thomas), and an industry speaker who focused on professionalism and preparation for employment (Micheline Corr from 'The Firm'). DIT Careers' Peter Lewis facilitated students in examining the links between their academic programme, their personal input and their career, in conjunction with final-year students. The final component was a team-building 'game', where students competed in groups to solve a number of challenges.

Some 117 students attended the workshop, of whom 84 completed an evaluation. The workshop scored highest in respect of the following dimensions:

- The workshop activities stimulated my learning (mean 3.73 out of 5)
- The material caused me to think (mean 4.30)
- I enjoyed meeting, and working with, new students (mean 4.12)
- I will be able to use what I learned in this workshop (mean 3.83)

Comments also included: 'It was brill!', 'It was fab!', 'Inspiring', and 'Very impressive'.

Evaluation of the Most Effective Models of Delivery of Get Smart!

One of the key rationales for the development of Get Smart! is that students' methods of engagement in third level education are very different to those of a decade ago (Cloete, de Villiers & Roodt, 2009). There are a number of factors at the core of these changes in students' profiles, expectations and willingness to engage. The author employed a number of different tools to communicate the Get Smart! initiative to the students and to optimise engagement. In response to current student trends, Facebook and Twitter were used to encourage students to engage more in their academic environment. A comparative evaluation was carried out between Facebook/Twitter and the more traditional virtual learning environment (VLE), in the DIT's case Webcourses.

The following research questions were addressed in the evaluation of Get Smart!

- To what extent are first year undergraduates in the School of Hospitality Management Tourism, DIT engaging with the Get Smart! 'module' on Webcourses and/or a Facebook group set up to support the Get Smart! initiative?
- Do these students view social networking, and Facebook in particular, as a valid and attractive medium for academic learning?

A survey was distributed to a sample of first year undergraduates within the School of Hospitality Management & Tourism in May 2010. Questionnaires were distributed personally by the author and a usable total of 50 was achieved. It is intended to repeat this survey with modifications early in the academic year 2010/11.

A detailed explanation of the results is available from the author, however the following results were deemed valuable in determining the most effective mode of delivering Get Smart! and communicating to students in this regard: 98% of students surveyed had an active Facebook profile, compared with only 11% who were using Twitter. This low usage of

Twitter had already come to light in the early stages of the Get Smart! initiative where it was evident that students were not 'following' Get Smart! on Twitter.

Similar problems with engagement were found with the Webcourses site. The fact that 62% of students checked their Facebook account twice or more each day indicates the challenge that educators face in reaching students with more 'academic material'. There was no such similarly frequent interaction with Webcourses. The most frequent response for Webcourses was once or twice a week (41%).

Some 75% of students had joined the Facebook group specifically created for Get Smart! Those students who had not signed up offered reasons including

- 'Get Smart! is purely for academic material'
- Privacy concerns (four students)
- 'Never got around to it' (two students)
- 'Worried that lecturers will see my profile' (three students)
- 'Didn't know about it' (two students)

Respondents in general had a very low level of membership of 'academic' Facebook groups, citing only DIT library services and their own programme group as examples.

The main activity engaged in by students who were members of the Get Smart! group on Facebook was viewing photographs. These were photographs of the various Get Smart! events, including the workshop. The implications of visual learning may be important here. Traditional platforms such as Webcourses are not strong on these features and may need to become so if they are to encourage more interaction.

Despite their overwhelming engagement with Facebook, only 27% of students felt that they would like to see module/academic content posted there as its main location. This compares to 46% who felt that academic material should be reserved for Webcourses; 27% of students felt the two sites could potentially be used in conjunction with each other.

All the above points will be taken into consideration when further developing Get Smart!

Evaluation of Project

Central to the Get Smart! project was a comprehensive range of feedback mechanisms.

Date	Type of feedback/evaluation	Main outputs
Sept. 2009	Get Smart! school-wide meeting	Discussion of Get Smart! framework and its operationalisation
Dec. 2009	Get Smart! school-wide meeting	Feedback on first semester
Jan. 2010	Get Smart! school-wide meeting	Planning for Get Smart! workshop
Feb. 2010	Get Smart! school-wide meeting	Planning/finalisation of Get Smart! workshop
June 2010	Get Smart! school-wide meeting	Final wrap-up and feedback
Sept. 2009	Individual meetings M.O'R and Faculty librarian	Development of Information Literacy sessions
Sept. 2009	Get Smart! included on agenda for all programme meetings	Programme-specific implementation of Get Smart!
Dec. 2009	Student evaluation questionnaire	Available from the author
Dec. 2009	Student focus group	Student feedback on semester 1
Feb. 2010	Student evaluation questionnaire	Available from the author
May 2010	Student questionnaire: perceptions of the Get Smart! Facebook group	Available from the author
June 2010	School-wide meeting	Overall feedback and recommendations for 2010–2011

The author also held many individual meetings with the Faculty librarian, Brian Gillespie, the career team for the Faculty of Tourism and Food, industry representatives and the Head of School of Hospitality Management & Tourism.

Recommendations to the School/Institute

1. All induction sessions for first-years should be revised to include an introduction to third-level learning. Whilst research carried out for Get Smart! shows that students find it difficult to assimilate the amount of information they already receive at induction, consideration needs to be given to the balance between socialisation/familiarisation and preparation for academic rigour.
2. Curricula should no longer assume students' ability to be confident users of information or independent thinkers/writers.
3. Information literacy skills should be embedded into all first year modules, with face-to-face tutorials if possible, supplemented by e-learning tutorials. The acquisition of such skills needs to be incentivised by some form of accreditation. The format employed in Get Smart! (linking into assessment marks for first year modules) is one such possibility. The author feels that this approach has met with greater success than the traditional curriculum approach whereby educators 'bolt on' a module which focuses on personal development. The development of information literacy skills and their integration into *all* modules of the curriculum is the innovative approach used in the development of Get Smart!
4. Social networking tools should now be explored as a means of communicating with first year students and improving their levels of engagement with their programme. These tools need to be evaluated in terms of their use alongside Webcourses, or indeed, possibly instead of such platforms.

5. During the Get Smart! initiative, a clear picture has emerged whereby students saw Facebook as a social tool and did not fully endorse its use for formal teaching purposes, although they were very open to receiving messages through this medium and there *are* opportunities for more informal learning. The relative newness of these tools does make it more difficult to assess how they may develop over time. More understanding is needed of usage profiles of students in a certain college/faculty. However, making the progression from using social networks as communication tools, to their application as more academic tools to supplement/replace traditional teaching was ultimately not within the scope of the project within this academic year.
6. Students no longer avail of the traditional means of getting to know other first years, and indeed classmates. Student union activities, etc., are now often sacrificed for part-time, or pseudo full-time work commitments. This leads to a sense of disengagement and loneliness. Cross-programme socialisation, such as the Get Smart! workshop, can help in this respect.
7. Engagement is a factor of students' ability and motivation. Engaging with third level students is problematic in today's crowded environment of media platforms and messaging. There is a limited time span to secure the engagement of first year students, after which it is very difficult to restore. The author sees this timeframe to be the duration of the first semester.

Proposed Future Work

- There are clearly wide and varied opportunities for more detailed research into the use of Facebook, Twitter and other social networking tools in an academic environment. The author plans to develop this preliminary study in the academic year 2010/11 to attempt to give a more disaggregated view of how and why students use social networking in academic environments. The use of Facebook as a means of assisting social integration into third level life will be explored further through Get Smart!
- It would also be useful to perform a comparative analysis of online/distance education programmes as different levels of engagement are often evident within such student cohorts.
- To develop and implement Get Smart! beyond the first year curriculum.
- To enlarge the scope of Get Smart! whereby it combines and enhances aspects of academic and non-academic skills, liaising with the students union, Campus Life, Careers and the DIT Retention office.
- To roll out a number of web-based modules to support the delivery of Get Smart!

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